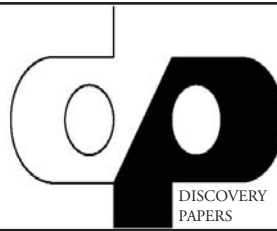


SEEDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 4:26-34
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You've heard of Alexander the Great. You know of Leo the Lionhearted. How about Dionysus the Insignificant? With a name like that, it's no wonder most people don't remember him.

He was born in 465 AD in the Asian region of Sythia, a land dismissed by the dominant powers and cultures of the day. He grew up to be a monk. Dionysus was a common name at the time, so in order to distinguish himself he took on the name Exiguus, which means "Insignificant." In his day, the calendar was linked to the reign of Diocletian, a ruthless Roman emperor who had ruled some 200 years earlier. Dionysus went to Rome and proposed a new calendar that recognized not the advent of a Roman ruler but the advent of a Jewish one. Thus, because of Dionysus the Insignificant, our calendar recognizes the coming of Jesus Christ into our world. We live in Anno Domini (The Year of Our Lord) 2008.

In the end, apparently insignificant things often matter the most. Many of us, though, are plagued by feelings of insignificance. The Beatles sang, "We all want to change the world," but most of us feel incapable of making much of a difference.¹ Jesus helps us with two parables recorded in Mark 4.

Thus we come to the last of the parables in Mark 4, which tell the story of how the kingdom of God is breaking into the world through Jesus Christ. Jesus shrouds the story in parables because it's a subversive one. The kingdom of God, as Jesus conceives of it, is coming in an unexpected way outside normal Jewish channels. Moreover, any movement that raises the specter of the kingdom of God was bound to run into the kingdom of Caesar. Therefore, Jesus teaches in parables, concealing the nature of the kingdom of God from opponents to avoid premature arrest but disclosing it to followers so that they might be instructed.

Mark 4:26-34:

And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than

all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE."

With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.²

The parable of the seed

The parable of the sower featured four types of soil, and only the fourth type, the good soil, produced fruit. The parable of the seed, on the other hand, features only one type of soil: the good soil.

The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seeds. He knows both that grain will not appear immediately and that he cannot cause it to appear. With nothing more to contribute beyond the casting of seeds, the man goes to sleep. His job is over—at least for the time being. Jesus does not literally say that the man does not know "how" the seed grows but that it grows without his knowing about it. The seed grows underground, hidden from view, so that the man can't see what's taking place.

The soil produces crops "by itself," apart from the man's intervention. Eventually, growth becomes evident with the appearance of the blade and culminates with the appearance of mature grain. The man, who has been inactive since he sowed the seed, springs into action again in order to harvest the grain.

The man sees his own life reflected in both the seed and the soil. The seed goes in the soil, and the man goes to bed. The seed grows, and the man gets up. The man does three things: he casts seed, he sleeps, and he harvests. Likewise, the soil does three things: it produces the blade, then the head, and then the mature grain. The man resonates with the rhythm of seed and soil.

What does the parable mean? Mark, by reporting both Jesus' reason for speaking in parables and the interpretation of the parable of the sower, shows us the way forward. The seed in both the parable of the sower and the parable of the seed represents the "word"—or message—concerning the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15; 2:2; 4:15, 33). The parable of the sower emphasized that the uneven response to Jesus' message does not negate the validity of it. The parable of the seed emphasizes that the kingdom, contrary to expectations, is coming neither visibly nor suddenly. Unbeknownst to most observers, it is present in the person of Jesus, and his message—though rejected by most—is penetrating the hearts of some like seeds cast on good soil.

The message will do its work, bearing fruit for the kingdom in and through the lives of those who believe it.

The message will produce a “harvest” consisting of the triumph of God’s justice, which involves both judgment and salvation—judgment for those who oppose the kingdom of God and salvation for those who welcome it. Mark 4:29 echoes Joel 3:13: “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.” The context of Joel 3 is judgment for the enemies of God and salvation for his people. Despite appearances, the kingdom is here, the kingdom is growing, and the kingdom will be consummated. God’s justice, which features his wise and loving rule through the Messiah, will prevail—in small but noticeable ways now but more on the final day. After the message has done its complete work, the consummation of the kingdom will be both visible and sudden. God himself will “immediately” put in the sickle. When Christ returns to consummate his reign, “every eye will see him” (Revelation 1:7).

The apostle John also uses harvest imagery, complete with the wielding of a sickle, to portray the final day of God’s justice (Revelation 14:14-20). Then the world will give birth to a new world: “a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). On that day, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God’s glory “as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

As he preaches the word and teaches disciples, Jesus is casting seeds in anticipation of the harvest, so to speak. Just as the man literally “sends” the sickle, Jesus would “send” his disciples to preach and cast out demons (Mark 3:13-14, 6:7-13). He would also “send” the Holy Spirit to empower them to implement the victory that God would win over evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus (John 16:7, Acts 1-2). God’s justice would be carried forward by his Spirit-empowered followers.

The parable, which speaks of a man who sleeps and rises and of seed that goes into the earth and grows, foreshadows the resurrection of both Jesus and his followers. For many Jews in Jesus’ day, talk of resurrection concerned the final restoration and vindication of Israel as God’s people (Ezekiel 37). Paul calls the resurrected Jesus “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). When Jesus went to sleep, no one believed the gospel. He also got up, however, and the world hasn’t been the same since. The resurrection of Christ (the first fruits) guarantees the future resurrection of God’s people (the final harvest). Jesus’ vision of the kingdom and those who embrace it will be vindicated.

Faithfulness counts

Kingdom work involves casting seeds: through proclamation, storytelling, or example declaring that God’s kingdom has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. What happens to the seeds, however, remains hidden from view. The seeds work underground—in the hidden places of the hearts of men, women, and children.

Things are not as they appear. The seed is powerful but not showy. It does its best work when no one’s watching.

The parable dissuades us from evaluating the work of the kingdom according to appearances and persuades us to faithfully engage in such work despite appearances. Faith involves believing in what you can’t see. Faithfulness involves acting on it. For many of us, the work tends to be more exhilarating if it’s attracting a lot of attention. It is no less significant if it’s attracting no attention, however. You can’t measure the results of kingdom work. Neither can you measure yourself by the apparent results of such work. The important thing is to do the work—to faithfully cast your seeds, season in and season out, even if you have nothing to show for your efforts. Furthermore, God often does his best and deepest work in our own hearts in times of apparent barrenness. After all, roots grow deeper when the atmosphere is dry.

I heard a story of a pastor who received glowing reviews of his sermon one Sunday. After the service, many told him how meaningful his sermon had been to them. He prayed, “Lord, please don’t puff me up!” One congregant, however, ripped the sermon, after which the pastor prayed, “Lord, please don’t puff me down!” Whether you’re praised or criticized, whether you’re noticed or unnoticed, whether or not you’re creating a buzz, it’s faithfulness that counts. The apostles conceived of themselves as “stewards of the mysteries of God.” God requires stewards not to be successful but to be “trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

The parable encourages us to engage in kingdom work but also to do so rhythmically—to cast our seeds and go to sleep, to do the work and get out of the way. For it’s possible to smother the seeds if we hover over them. Hovering can not only smother God’s work in others, it can also smother his work in us. Many of us, because we don’t trust God, place impossible burdens on ourselves to produce results. We leave no room for God to work in others or in ourselves. But the mere fact that God made us as creatures who need sleep should teach us something about work. Sowing the seeds of the kingdom is important, but it’s important in the context of our partnership with God. Prayerfully, faithfully engage in the work. Then get out of the way. Don’t coerce, manipulate, or hover. When you get out of the way, you give God room to work. You also give him a chance to relieve you of the burdens you’ve placed on yourself.

In a children’s story by Arnold Lobel, Toad was impressed by Frog’s beautiful garden. Frog gave his friend some seeds and told him, “Plant them in the ground, and soon you will have a garden.” Toad ran home, planted the seeds, and told them, “Now seeds, start growing!” He walked back and forth impatiently and even shouted at the seeds, but he saw no growth. Frog happened by, and Toad complained, “My seeds will not grow.” Frog told him, “You are shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow. . . . Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on

them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow.” That night, Toad looked out the window and, seeing no signs of growth, concluded that the seeds were afraid of the dark. So he got up, took some candles with him, and read the seeds a story to calm their fears. In the following days, he sang songs and read poems, but to no avail.³

Cast the seeds of the gospel; then get out of the way. An anxious farmer doesn't help the cause at all.

The parable also promises that we will see the fruits of our labor. That promise will be fully realized at the final harvest, when the kingdom comes suddenly, visibly, and entirely. The one who casts the seeds also puts in the sickle. We who have been sent out by Jesus will participate in the harvest. We will see the seeds we have sown, along with all the other seeds sown for the sake of the kingdom, fructify in a new world. We can't begin to imagine what will happen to our hearts when we realize, finally and surely, that God has used our labor on behalf of his eternal glory. Based on the apostle Paul's command to “bestow more abundant honor” on apparently “weaker” members of the body, we have every reason to believe that God will especially honor the work that went unnoticed (1 Corinthians 12:20-25). Perhaps the days of apparent barrenness will turn out to be the most fruitful of all.

The promise of seeing the fruits of our labor serves to motivate us in the present. Yes, the parable says, your work will bear fruit, even if you don't see any. Perhaps, though, when we need a little encouragement to carry on, God will show us signs of the harvest to come—a blade here, a head of grain there. He'll show us, in a visible way here and now, that our labor is not vain.

The parable applies to all who sow seeds for the kingdom but manifestly to those who teach the gospel to youth. The fruit oftentimes isn't obvious. Nevertheless, for the love of Christ and for the love of these incredible young people God brings into your life, you pour your life into them. And, without anyone knowing it, they're sowing seeds in you, as love for them and for the gospel grows in your heart. For those who come alongside children and teens for the sake of the gospel, or who are considering doing so, let the parable of the seed carry you forward.

The parable of the mustard seed

The final parable in Mark 4, unlike the two previous parables that involved seeds, features a particular kind of seed. A mustard seed, which Jesus likens to the kingdom of God, was proverbial in Israel for smallness (Matthew 17:20). Although the seed is small, it produces an exceptionally large plant with branches sufficient to provide support and shade for nesting birds.

The prophets used trees as images for kingdoms (Ezekiel 17:22-24; Ezekiel 31:1-14, Daniel 4:10-27). In particular, Jesus' parable echoes Ezekiel 17:22-24, which extolled the superiority of the kingdom of God and predicted its triumph. In Ezekiel's metaphor, the kingdom of God, once

it became a “stately cedar,” would bless the nations: birds of every kind would nest in the shade of its branches.

Jesus' message about the kingdom was meeting with mixed response. The kingdom, in Jesus' view, wasn't coming visibly and suddenly, as many had hoped. Yes, he was healing people and casting out demons, but he was undermining national hopes and associating with the wrong people. Many people, particularly Jewish leaders, didn't envision that Jesus and his motley crew would amount to much.

Jesus is saying, through the parable of the mustard seed, that neither he nor his followers nor his vision of the kingdom should be dismissed for these reasons. An inconspicuous beginning does not negate the possibility of a glorious end. Despite appearances, the kingdom of God is arriving in and through Jesus, even if he's not making the splash that many would have expected. The apostle Paul writes that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27). In time, Jesus' vision of the kingdom will triumph in a way that brings God's loving justice to the world.

After Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, his disciples began the task of implementing God's victory over evil, preaching the arrival of the kingdom, casting out demons, and healing the sick—and throwing open the doors of the kingdom to the nations. Nevertheless, Jewish leaders dismissed them, just as they dismissed Jesus, in part because the disciples were “uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13). A wise leader, however, acknowledged the possibility that God was working through them. If such were the case, Gamaliel told his associates, “you will not be able to overthrow them” and any opposition would amount to “fighting against God” (Acts 6:38-39). Today, people the world over nest under the shade of the tree that grew from the mustard seed that Jesus and his first followers planted.

Mark reports that Jesus' regular practice was to teach publicly in parables but to explain their meaning privately to his followers. By teaching in parables, Jesus confounded enemies, who could have mounted a more effective opposition against him if he were more straightforward. At the same time, he coaxed followers to consider the deeper meanings of the parables. Brian Morgan, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, comments:

By shrouding the truth of the kingdom in a veil of secrecy, only those who gave their full attention to attaining the mystery would comprehend its message. As the truth of the parable was revealed, it became all the more precious to those who had worked to understand it. When truth is hard-won, passions are ignited and the flame of love fills the soul. In this way, the light of the parable was passed on to the world only by those who loved the Savior.⁴

Every contribution counts

The message of the God's victory over evil, as we convey it and embody it, will be discounted by many because it

challenges hopes, be they collective or individual, just as it challenged the hopes of Israel when Jesus first announced it. Not to worry. The gospel gives our world the hope it needs—hope for the final banishment of all that is evil and the arrival of all that is good. The Olympics can't rid the world of evil and fill it with good. None of our presidential candidates can promise that kind of hope. Yet the gospel isn't getting near the attention that the Olympics and our presidential election are getting this year. All the hoopla that surrounds other causes in our world is enough to make those of us who advance the gospel feel laughably irrelevant. Not to worry. For all the attention that everything else gets, only the Messiah can save the world.

With this in mind, the parable of the mustard seed encourages us to toil for the sake of the kingdom *especially* if such work is overlooked, discounted, or ridiculed. In God's kingdom, there are no small places, no small people, no small ministries, and no small contributions. The kingdom of God is still growing and granting rest to more and more people around the world. Our work, however obscure, contributes to its growth. Everything small done for the sake of the gospel grows to be big. One day, the little mustard seed that Jesus planted will grow to provide shade for the entire earth.

When the Israelites began to rebuild their temple after returning from exile, some of the old men wept because it seemed to them that this version wouldn't measure up to the original (Ezra 3:12). The work seemed meaningless to them. Through the prophet Zechariah, God spoke to this concern: "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). That which seemed meaningless to them was valuable in the sight of God. Moreover, God promised to enhance their work, telling the people to "take courage and work" because he would "fill this house with glory" and that the latter glory of the temple would exceed even its former glory (Haggai 2:1-9).

When I was in my early thirties, I taught a Bible study for a small group of junior high boys. I also hung out with them from time to time. I played a little ball with them, shot some pool with them, and took them to the arcade. I enjoyed the guys, and it didn't seem to me that I was doing that much for them. I had no idea what God was doing in their hearts. Ten years later one of them tracked me down and wrote to me. He wanted me to know that he had gotten married and noted, "I've told my wife about the impact you've had on my life. It's amazing to think that just hanging out with a dorky junior higher can make a difference, but it really does." Your labor is not in vain.

The parable of the mustard seed, like the parable that preceded it, applies to all kingdom work. However, it especially encourages those who take on so-called "lay ministry." Although New Testament teaches us to view family life and secular work as ministry, it knows nothing of the modern clergy-laity distinction and it wants to equip all believers "for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Colossians 3, 1 Peter, Ephesians 4:12). Many people who labor for the sake of the gospel beyond work and home feel constrained by time. Some feel that

the time they have to give beyond work and home is so small as to be meaningless. Others who find the time feel that their contribution is at best a small one. The parable of the mustard seed tells us that there is no such thing as a small contribution to the work of the gospel. God enhances everything.

Your little garden

How do the two parables in Mark 4:26-34 help us with feelings of insignificance? The parable of the seed assures us that our faithfulness to the work of the gospel is contributing to the consummation of the kingdom. The parable of the mustard seed assures us that every contribution, no matter how small, contributes to the consummation of the kingdom. The parables give us two images of the future to encourage us in the present: a harvest and a tree. The harvest images the triumph of God's justice, and the tree images a home for all God's people. The seeds you plant in your little garden today will bless the world some day. They'll bless the world forever. Talk about significance!

Remember Frog and Toad? After doing everything he could to make his seeds grow, an exhausted Toad finally fell asleep. Later, Frog woke him and said, "Look at your garden!" Little green plants were coming out of the ground. "At last!" shouted Toad.⁵ I wonder: What will it be like when we wake up in God's new creation to see what he has done with the seeds we've sown?

NOTES

¹ John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "Revolution 1" (Sony Beatles Ltd.).

² Literary structure:

A Kingdom of God comparison (26a)

B Like a man who casts seed upon the soil (26b)

C Surprising growth: Soil produces "by itself" (27-28)

D Benefit: Harvest of grain (29)

A' Kingdom of God comparison (30)

B' Like a mustard seed sown upon the soil (31)

C' Surprising growth: Larger than all the garden plants (32a)

D' Benefit: Branches for birds (32b)

³ Arnold Lobel, "The Garden," Frog and Toad Together (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

⁴ Brian Morgan, "How Does the Kingdom Grow?" (Cupertino, Calif.: Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, 1998).

⁵ Lobel.

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